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## Book review: Gotcha!

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# Book Reviews

Editor: Martin Hirst

**LUMBY, Catherine (1999)**

**Gotcha!** Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1999. 280 pp.  
ISBN 1 86508 073 X.

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"Good morning. Nothing happened today. Here with that story is Gary Vance in London, Mike Bell in Moscow, and Rowena Ingham in London".

It may often seem as though the tabloid media - or papp (after papparazzi) media - is all about nothing. Princess Diana's alleged bulimia. The shape of President Clinton's penis. Is there a curse on the Kennedys? *Woman's Day* after day, *E News* after *E News*, *Hard Copy* after *Hard Copy*, the stream of nothing pours out - trivial, seductive, and ultimately unsatisfying: necessitating further ingestion. And here with that story is Catharine Lumby in Sydney, making a case that the papp media isn't as bad as it's made out to be by all those serious, elitist journalists who wish they were so popular.

At least, I think she's making a case. In this book, born from a PhD and alchemised into a more or less useful contribution to the public debate on the media, she coyly refuses to come right out and say the papp media is actually good for us. In making her hardly-worth-making case she delves sometimes, excruciatingly, into tabloid language herself.

In what is, to be fair, a thorough and wide-ranging examination of popular media she does make a few hard points. American writer David Mamet, in *Three Uses Of The Knife* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), argues persuasively that we need drama - it's the way we structure our imaginative lives, as cause-effect-resolution. Lumby believes the papp media gives us the world-as-drama, and in saying so she does canvass some interesting ideas. The Diana drama does, as she says, raise some relevant points about the role of celebrity in postmodern-ish society: Lewinsky/Clinton does raise issues of gender power.

However, she fails to point out that the tabloid media rarely

if ever deals with world imperialism, the environment, or economics, all of which affect our lives vastly more. Again, she is right to say that Pauline Hanson confounds the traditional Left/Right dichotomy - but this is hardly news, on any level. All populists do this. These few good if obvious points are overwhelmed by dubious arguments, unsupported assertions, and plain woolly thinking.

Consider, for example, the assertion that community protest groups sprang from the media, and at least some of them from tabloid media. No arguments are adduced in support of this questionable proposition. Or consider the statement that the papp media "gets behind" the stories of the day to unmask the real power in any situation. Even if this were uncontestable, isn't it at least equally true of serious media?

Her defence of talk-show methods and ethics is equally concerning. One of the criticisms of popular talkshows is that they raise issues without solving them: create dramatic conflict without resolving it. Their hosts are not trained counsellors, and they do not follow up on the traumas they air (leading, in one famous case, to a murder of a gay man after a U.S. talkshow). Again, she speaks in the same breath of *Elle* magazine and the O.J. Simpson trial as if they were of the same ilk. And her attempt to align popular media, by association, with globalism ignores the fact that all media is now global. Then, she parrots the notion that "ordinary" people cannot tell the difference between the real and the mediated. Such naivete makes papp of her thesis. Her approach seems to be based more on setting up Aunt Sallys and knocking them down than on intelligent argument.

Almost at the end of the book, her core argument emerges. She is not saying the tabloid media should be held in as high regard as the serious media, only that it should be respected, and that the best ideas of the intelligent media trickle down to the papp outlets in due course. She has labored, in effect, to produce an acorn. Certainly, good ideas trickle down, but we might do well to remember that when Freud's ideas on clinical psychology similarly trickled down they were taken out of context and misquoted.

If she is insisting that emotion be respected as a legitimate element in public media, she has a point, but does it need a book to say so? She is, I suspect, a naive idealist in the mould of McLuhan or the later Tim Leary, believing that mass media empowers the masses, whereas history suggests it may equally enslave them. Here, perhaps, she could do with some of the cynicism of her earlier chapters.

Ultimately, though, the big disappointments of this book are its lack of respect for intelligence, and the assertions not

followed up - such as the bold, bald statement that tabloid media enshrines "womens' values", which cries out for clarification.

There is no intelligent life on the *Daily Planet*. Intelligent media may make mistakes, may be patronising at times, even elitist, but at least there are brains at work: Journalistica Intelligentsia. Journalistica Emotionalis is unpredictable, woolly, and ultimately of little practical use in fashioning the informed citizenry that democracy requires.

I object profoundly to the thesis of this book. Tabloid is not the equal of serious journalism, and for the harm it does it deserves to be unappreciated. I say let the handicappers be restricted to the Melbourne Cup or Stawell Gift, but let excellence have its reward in the field of media. And lest we forget, Diana was hounded by paparazzi, not by the *London Times*. Quality media is so called because of the quality of its investigative reporting, which illuminates the issues of the day, and for its striving to report events objectively -- not because it is "elitist". That media should be most honored which most serves us, where "us" is the readers, viewers and listeners who consume it, rather than that which offers all the analytical focus of vanilla fudge.

Good media does not need sensationalism to hold our attention. The finance and weather reports do not lie, yet they are watched with interest by millions every night. Let's have the courage to admit that some media is better than other media, just as some shoes, or insurance policies are better than others. If I have to choose between, say, *Jim Lehrer's News Hour* or *E News*, I won't be switching off the Australian *Special Broadcasting Service* (SBS). If that makes me elitist, then I plead guilty. ■

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